



Ecumenical Trends

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Metropolitan Community Churches and Ecumenism

From The Editor

The range of questions surrounding human sexuality hold a prominent place on the agendas of the churches and ecumenical organizations. When the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches first applied for membership in the National Council of Churches in 1981, the question of sexuality was placed directly in front of the member churches. While the NCCC was not ready to grant membership to the predominantly gay and lesbian UFMCC, it has been engaged in an official dialogue with the church for several years. In this issue, UFMCC spokesperson Rev. Kittredge Cherry describes the church's own understanding of its place in the ecumenical world.

As the Orthodox Churches are reassessing their place in the ecumenical movement, a new Patriarch of Constantinople has been elected who has been an active participant in the ecumenical movement. While it is too early to say what this will mean for the future of the quest for Christian unity, Orthodox historian and theologian Fr. Thomas FitzGerald offers some insights both into the ecumenical background of Patriarch Bartholomew and the difficulties experienced by the Orthodox Churches in the current ecumenical climate.

Following the theological agreements reached last year between the Byzantine Greek Orthodox Churches and the non-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox Churches, the

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The Metropolitan Community Churches Stand Both On The Edge And At The Heart Of Ecumenism

By Rev. Kittredge Cherry

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) is often viewed as an outsider, even an intruder, in the ecumenical movement. The reasons are many. UFMCC is bringing the gospel in a new way to a marginalized community; it was founded by a self-affirming gay man, Rev. Elder Troy Perry, and ministers primarily in the lesbian and gay community. UFMCC is also young; it was founded in 1968 and has since grown to more than 265 churches with 27,000 members in 16 countries. UFMCC does not yet hold official membership in any national council of churches nor in the World Council of Churches. For all these reasons, mainstream church leaders as well as UFMCC members and other gay and lesbian



UFMCC Ecumenical Officer, Rev. Nancy Wilson speaks at Canberra Assembly of World Council of Churches.

Christians tend to see the denomination as a challenger to the ecumenical movement, pressuring it from the outside.

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analogy between the eucharist and old covenant liturgies is based on "the present efficacy of God's work when it is celebrated by God's people in a liturgy." We find the presentation which stresses the analogy between memorial celebration of Israel and the eucharist acceptable. The difference between the two is expressed in Nos.5-8.

"The connection established between the sacrifice of the cross and the eucharist corresponds to Catholic understanding. The sacrifice of the eucharist is one in which the sacrifice of the cross is represented to the end that its saving power be applied here and now for the salvation of the world.

"The present efficacy of the sacrifice of the cross in the eucharist is grounded on the presence of the risen Lord, who cannot be separated from his saving work..." (No.6)

6. See "Sacrifice" by Otto Semmelroth in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* edited by Karl Rahner. (New York: Crossroad, 1986) p.1488-1491 and 1492-1495.

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Metropolitan Community Churches,

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At the same time, UFMCC lives at the very heart of the ecumenical movement. Every worship service and meeting that UFMCC holds is an exercise in ecumenism, for the denomination draws members from every imaginable Christian tradition, as well as from other religions and from the unchurched. Internal discussions about baptism, eucharist and ministry parallel the official dialogues conducted by major ecumenical agencies. Ecumenism itself is evolving into new grassroots forms that include UFMCC as an active part, including AIDS ministry coalitions and feminist networks. In this sense, UFMCC is transforming the ecumenical movement from within, like the leaven in a loaf of bread.

UFMCC's self-understanding in relation to the larger Church has changed dramatically since its founding in 1968.

The balance between these two postures toward the ecumenical movement — outsider and insider — is summed up in the name that UFMCC gives to its ecumenical arm: the Department of Ecumenical Witness and Ministry. Its mission is 1) to bear witness to UFMCC's experience of God, even when that sets us apart from the rest of the Church, and 2) to minister with compassion to the whole Church, for we are all one as members of the Body of Christ. In this article, I will explore how UFMCC views itself as outsider and insider in the ecumenical movement.

UFMCC Approaching the Ecumenical Movement from Outside

UFMCC's self-understanding in relation to the larger Church has changed dramatically since its found-

ing in 1968. For the first four years, UFMCC saw itself as a response to other denominations. Its leaders were fond of saying, "We are working to work ourselves out of business." Perry recalled the self-image that was common in that era of UFMCC's history:

"Somewhere along the way many of us, myself included, had developed the habit of saying that Metropolitan Community Church's only reason for being was to encourage long-established denominations to reexamine their homophobic interpretations of theology. A substantial number of members in our congregation agreed that once we revealed the extent of hypocrisy in other churches, their unchristian attitudes would surely be corrected and — continuing with that overly optimistic theory — each of us would happily be welcomed back into the reformed denomination of his or her previous persuasion."¹

The consensus shifted at UFMCC's Third General Conference in 1972, when Rev. Elder James Sandmire preached a sermon that sparked a new definition of UFMCC and its role in relation to the larger Church. In his sermon, Sandmire, then pastor of MCC San Francisco, urged UFMCC to become a permanent spiritual home, not simply for lesbians and gay men, but for all people:

"Dissolution of MCC under any circumstances would be a terrible tragedy, particularly if God has truly called us to be an authentic voice of our time! I believe we are the new establishment church. I believe we are a new expression of the Gospel. I believe God has called us to be a guide for other churches which need to be shown the way toward a rediscovery of Jesus' love. ... I believe God would desire that we stop talking about going out of business and start actually being the new prophetic voice to the world."²

Just two years later, in 1974, UFMCC's General Conference passed a resolution for the first time stating that the denomination should consider applying for membership in ecumenical and inter-religious organizations, including the NCC in the United States. The resolution was introduced by Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, who has served as UFMCC's Chief Ecumenical Officer since 1979. (UFMCC now has dialogue with ecumenical groups in several nations, but examples in this article will focus on relations with the NCC/USA because it was UFMCC's first national-level ecumenical attempt and the attitudes it reflects are similar to UFMCC's experience outside the States.)

Based on its new self-understanding as a denomination with a long-term future, UFMCC undertook a major study of its mission and ecumenical role in 1975. UFMCC's Commission on Faith, Fellowship and Order surveyed every UFMCC member and coordinated local and regional discussions throughout the denomination. The result was a report that continues to shape debate within UFMCC today about its ecumenical identity and the tension between reaching out primarily to the gay and lesbian community, but being open to all people. Similar questions of ecclesiology have been raised by NCC leadership in relation to UFMCC's application for membership. The report speaks definitively about UFMCC's role in relation to the larger Church:

"Current discussion about the community to which MCC is called to minister has begun to polarize into two identifiable views:

(a) One view, MCC's community of ministry includes all humanity. Since it is a Christian Church, its missionary efforts and resources must be directed toward all people. There may be no implication of exclusivity in our ministry.

(b) On the other view, the community that MCC is called to serve should be defined as primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, the Gay community. Since many churches are unable or unwilling to faithfully preach the Gospel to Gay people and do not effectively respond to their spiritual and social needs, then Gay persons must have the opportunity to seek their own worshipping communities...

It is likely for the foreseeable future that our congregations may be largely Gay in composition. That is congruent with our call and our beginnings. But also congruent with our call is the fact that we exist for the world. Our very existence is a prophetic witness to the world and the Church."³

The concept of "lesbian and gay community" suggests that UFMCC's outreach is not to people who do a particular kind of action, but rather it reaches out to a particular kind of people who share a common culture, not unlike an ethnic group. Wilson expressed this point of view when she wrote,

"I suppose I am unrepentantly a gay/lesbian 'essentialist,' believing that my lesbianism is as old as I am, with the quality of givenness, an ontological quality not unlike (though not identical to) ethnicity. That essentialist bias is qualified by my understanding that human sexuality is a complex matrix of factors. Like many gay philosophers and poets, I believe that gay men and lesbians are a curious amalgam of 'ethnoi.' So I do not believe our gay culture is solely the creation of external, sociological, oppressive forces. At the core we experience a deep longing for our 'kind.'"⁴

The sense of lesbian and gay people as an ethnic group is sometimes made concrete during worship in MCC churches. For example, UFMCC churches are likely to offer classes on the Bible and homosexuality, and to hold a special gay and lesbian pride worship service in mid-

June commemorating the Stonewall resistance that marked the start of the modern lesbian and gay rights movement. As one parishioner put it, "There are churches that offer worship in Spanish, Korean, and sign language. I want to hear the Gospel in gay.

UFMCC ... achieved a new and important level of global witness by 1991 by participating in the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly in Canberra

UFMCC takes seriously its call to be a "prophetic witness to the world." It achieved a new and important level of global witness by 1991 by participating in the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia. For the first time, UFMCC gained official observer status at a WCC assembly. At the Canberra assembly, the UFMCC delegation organized a

Two of today's most controversial issues in many denominations — ordination of lesbian and gay people and rites of blessing for same-sex couples — are foregone conclusions in UFMCC.

group to work for justice for lesbian and gay people. This group, which included about 50 people from 10 nations, sponsored the first gay- and lesbian-affirming worship service at a WCC event and petitioned the WCC to add lesbian and gay issues to its justice agenda. Rev. Greg Smith, UFMCC's Australian District Coordinator, addressed the WCC plenary session by invitation about his experience as a gay pastor with HIV disease. Wilson spoke as part of a

"Women Around the World" panel at the WCC's WomenSpace area.

There is little agreement about gay and lesbian issues in the mainline churches and therefore within the established ecumenical organizations to which they belong. UFMCC, simply by its presence, reminds all concerned of these disagreements. Two of today's most controversial issues in many denominations — ordination of lesbian and gay people and rites of blessing for same-sex couples — are foregone conclusions in UFMCC. In some contexts, just to say the words "homosexuality" or "UFMCC" is considered advocacy. The subject is so difficult to broach that on the floor of the NCC General Board meeting in November 1991 some members expressed the need to create a "safe space" for dialogue about gay and lesbian issues within the ecumenical context and their own denominations. Behind the scenes at these meetings, UFMCC representatives are frequently approached by closeted lesbians and gay men from mainline churches who want to voice their secret support and confide the private pain of hiding their sexuality.

In this context, UFMCC can easily be seen by members and non-members as a young and fearless prophet challenging the religious authorities to embody God's justice and love. The discomfort that UFMCC's presence causes is a necessary part of the justice-making process. UFMCC can be identified with Christ as he upsets the religious establishment by eating with sinners, healing on the Sabbath, breaking the purity code and the like. He explains, "You leave the commandment of God and hold fast human tradition" (Mark 7:8).

Questions of justice for gay and lesbian people are not the only barrier to UFMCC's participation in the ecumenical movement. Classism is an important factor that often goes unmentioned. A UFMCC document presented to the NCC General Board in January 1991 summarized how

class differences contribute to UFMCC's status as an outsider to the ecumenical mainstream:

Class issues affect UFMCC's relationship to mainline churches and the NCC, which is dominated by these churches. NCC membership does not include the Roman Catholics, Southern Baptists and Pentecostals, from which UFMCC draws many of its members. From our perspective, those NCC member communions that are identified with the working class (the Orthodox and historic Black churches) seem to be marginalized within the NCC.⁵

UFMCC at the Heart of the Ecumenical Movement

UFMCC also understands itself to be at the heart of the ecumenical movement because its members come from all the NCC member communions, plus many more. Internal dialogue about the nature of Biblical authority is just as fierce and potentially divisive as it is in the larger Church, although homosexuality is not the focus of this debate within UFMCC. Worship at UFMCC is similar to worship at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra, Australia: a blending of elements from disparate traditions.

UFMCC is at the center of grassroots ecumenism based on some specific issues, too. The AIDS epidemic has taken a heavy toll on UFMCC, causing the death of nearly 4,500 members as of October 1990. UFMCC responded to this need by helping to form and then actively participating in a variety of AIDS ministry organizations in cities throughout the United States and at the national level. In a less dramatic way, UFMCC and some of its members are involved in the feminist women's spirituality movement, a form of ecumenism described in a recent article by Mary E. Hunt, co-director of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual in Silver Spring, MD. "Feminism begins with the presumption of ecumenism, of connectedness from house to

house (oikos) throughout the world. It assumes rather than proves connectedness between humans, animals, the divine and the earth."⁶ She goes on to say that the women's spirituality movement, in which women who have roots in the Christian mainstream come together to find spiritual nourishment beyond it, can be a source of inspiration to mainline ecumenism. A lesbian and gay spirituality movement is emerging globally at this time. Like the women's spirituality movement, it is eclectic yet integrated, and may provide models for the mainstream.

From UFMCC's perspective, its grassroots ecumenical activity and broad-based membership mean that the denomination has much to offer to the NCC and other established ecumenical bodies. UFMCC applied for membership in the NCC in September 1981 with the certainty that UFMCC already held full membership in the Body of Christ. The purpose of the NCC application was not to gain approval, but to build a deeper relationship with a group to which UFMCC was already bound as fellow followers of Jesus Christ. The reasons for the application were outlined in a report from UFMCC's ecumenical department to the General Conference in August 1981. It read in part:

There are two compelling reasons for our involvement with groups like the National and World Councils of Churches. The first reason is that we are a fellowship of Christian churches who are surrounded by other Christian bodies which have existed far longer than our 13-year history. Though we may disagree with some aspects of the other members of the Body of Christ, we share a common faith, we are able to learn some things from them, and we are able to benefit in some ways from their experience and guidance. ... The most compelling reason for membership in the NCC is to keep its member churches true to the NCC's stated goal of "proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the end that all persons may believe in Him."⁷

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With the acceptance of that report, application was made to the NCC. In 1982, an NCC committee ruled UFMCC eligible for NCC membership, but the next year the NCC Governing Board postponed a vote on the matter indefinitely. In 1990, the NCC officers reviewed parliamentary rules and reported that the application no longer existed. UFMCC has not reapplied, but continues in dialogue with the NCC. Wilson, who has represented UFMCC to the NCC throughout the process, said present efforts by the NCC General Board through its committee display an unprecedented sense that the dialogue with UFMCC may provide essential help to the entire NCC. A common attitude among UFMCC members toward the dialogue was expressed by Wilson in her 1987 report to the NCC Governing Board:

*Whether as insider
or outsider, UFMCC
sees itself as a permanent part of the
ecumenical landscape.*

We come here only because we believe that we are already deeply a

part of the NCC, and that no vote or decision on your part can amend that truth. We know that being a part of you is not easy for you, and it certainly is not always easy for us. But we solemnly vow to you that we will never go away — as long as there is a UFMCC, an NCCC, a gay and lesbian community and an ecumenical movement, we will be here.⁸

Whether as insider or outsider, UFMCC sees itself as a permanent part of the ecumenical landscape. Sometimes the UFMCC seems to stand on the outer edge and push for the lesbian and gay experience of God to be heard and honored. At other times, it is a microcosm of the ecumenical movement, transforming that movement because it is so deeply embedded within it. These self-understandings continue to grow and change as UFMCC members discuss their call to ecumenism.

Notes

1. Troy Perry with Thomas Swicegood, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 48-49.

2. Ibid, pp. 51-52.

3. UFMCC Commission on Faith, Fellowship and Order, "Interim Report," 1976. Reprinted in *In Unity* (December 1976), pp. 29-30.

4. Malcolm Boyd and Nancy Wilson, *Amazing Grace: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Faith* (Fremont, CA: The Crossing Press, 1991), p. 18.

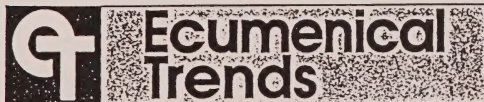
5. Nancy Wilson and Kittredge Cherry, "Developments in the UFMCC During the 1980s and Beyond," Document Plenary 14A, presented to the NCC General Board Nov. 13, 1991, p. 2. Board Nov. 13, 1991, p. 2.

6. Mary Hunt, "Feminist Ecumenism: Models for the Mainstream." *The Christian Century*, 108:31 (Oct. 31, 1991), p. 1000.

7. Report of the UFMCC Department of Ecumenical Relations to the Tenth General Conference of UFMCC, August 1981, in Houston, TX.

8. Nancy Wilson, "Report to the NCC," Nov. 5, 1987, p. 3.

(Rev. Kittredge Cherry is Field Director of Ecumenical Witness and Ministry for the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and author of *Hide & Speak: How to Free Ourselves from Our Secrets*, Harper Collins, 1991.)



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